

## How Vulnerable Are Consumers to Blatant Persuasion Attempts?

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## How Vulnerable Are Consumers to Blatant Persuasion Attempts?

We show that subtle environmental elements – such as background music – can reduce skepticism and decrease consumers' use of persuasion knowledge. In four studies we show that the presence of background music can result in increased distraction and increased inclination to follow salespeople's advice. Remarkably, this effect persists even when the ulterior motive of the salesperson is made extremely salient. Our results suggest that consumers may be more vulnerable to persuasion attempts than is usually assumed in the persuasion knowledge literature.

Consumers are often confronted with mixed marketing signals. Marketing communications may contain sincere and diagnostic information to help the consumer make optimal choices, but may also reflect the ulterior motive of manipulating choice for profit, or sometimes even mere deception. In a retail setting, the salesperson's advice may reflect a sincere recommendation, or it may reflect a persuasion attempt that is driven by his commission fee. For the consumer, making the right purchase decision is not an easy task. Consumer welfare requires that consumers faced with persuasive communication can extract diagnostic information and can discount persuasion attempts driven by mere ulterior motives.

Surprisingly little consumer research has investigated when and how consumers will discount for manipulative marketing influences. Using a scenario study, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) have provided evidence that unless marketers' motives are inscrutably ambiguous, consumers are well able to discount manipulative or deceitful attempts. This would imply that in general, consumers can easily resist misleading influences. From the perspective of consumer welfare – this is good news. However, this fairly optimistic conclusion seems at odds with both the extensive literature on the remarkable efficiency of interpersonal influence techniques (e.g. Cialdini and Goldstein 2004) and the many known cases brought to regulatory bodies documenting manipulative and misleading commercial practices.

We argue that previous work on persuasion knowledge may have overstated consumers' ability to discount manipulative persuasion attempts. More specifically, we show that subtle environmental elements – such as background music – can prevent consumers from applying their persuasion knowledge. In four studies we show that background music can lead to an increased inclination to follow the salesperson's advice – even when the ulterior motive is

extremely blatant. Hereby we extend the current persuasion knowledge literature in at least two important ways. First, we show that the ability to discount deceptive influence attempts not only depends on whether consumers have access to relevant persuasion knowledge or whether the ulterior motive is sufficiently salient, but also on the presence of subtle environmental elements, which may disrupt comprehension and / or deliberation of the (deceptive) advice. Secondly, we show that consumers are more vulnerable to persuasion attempts than is usually assumed in the persuasion knowledge literature and that influence attempts can be successful even when the attempt is extremely blatant. In addition, we argue that the overestimation of consumers' ability to deal with persuasion attempts may be explained by the fact that prior studies have exclusively focused on participants' reactions to scenarios, and not – as in the present research – on their reactions to actually experienced marketing tactics. As a result, previous studies may have measured consumers' theories about how to deal with persuasion attempts, and not as much their actual reactions in such circumstances.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Consumers' Persuasion Knowledge**

Consumers can resist misleading persuasion attempts by relying on acquired knowledge about marketer influence attempts (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Friestad 1995; Friestad and Wright 1994; Wright 2002). Persuasion knowledge reflects what consumers know about the persuasive attempts of advertisers and marketers and includes beliefs about underlying motives, strategies and tactics; beliefs about the effectiveness and appropriateness of these attempts; and

beliefs about ways to deal with these attempts. People learn about persuasion in many ways: From firsthand experiences in social interactions with friends and family, from observing persuasion agents, and from media and governmental campaigns.

Persuasion knowledge acts as a schema: It guides consumers' attention to various aspects of an advertisement campaign or sales presentation, and it provides inferences about the agent's underlying motives. It also provides further information about how to cope with the persuasion attempts. For example, when a consumer starts to have doubts about the salesperson's sincerity, he may decide to leave the store without further listening to the sales talk, or he can decide to start a discussion and try to get a good deal either way.

A number of experimental studies have demonstrated consumers' ability to make inferences about persuasion attempts. In the field of advertising, Campbell and Keller (2003) and Kirmani (1997) have shown that increased advertisement repetition leads to more negative thoughts and to heightened consumer skepticism. Whereas moderate levels of repetition signal product quality (consumers perceive repetition as costly and infer the company's commitment to the product), higher levels of advertisement repetition are perceived as excessive expenditures which results in doubts about the manufacturer's confidence in product quality. Similarly, consumers' perception of high advertisement costs, leads to increased criticism and doubts about the product quality (Kirmani 1990; Kirmani and Wright 1989).

### Correcting for Persuasive Attempts

From the perspective of consumer welfare, insight into when and how consumers apply their persuasion knowledge and especially when they correct for manipulative and deceitful

influence attempts is highly relevant. Surprisingly however, little consumer research has addressed this issue.

Campbell and Kirmani (2000) suggest that inferences about persuasion motives are influenced by how accessible these motives are in consumers' memory. Accessibility refers to how easily a mental construct (such as persuasion knowledge) is activated from memory (Higgins and King 1981). This ease of retrieval is influenced by factors such as: consumer expectations, the strength and intensity of the association between ulterior motive and consumers' persuasion knowledge, and the frequency of activation of the ulterior motive (Campbell and Kirmani 2000). One can expect that, during a sales encounter for example, the motive of influencing consumers in order to make a sale and / or increasing one's commission fee will be relatively accessible because the sales context is likely to activate one's persuasion knowledge. Correspondingly, Sujan, Bettman, and Sujan (1986) have found that consumers are more likely to associate clothing salespeople with a focus on selling the product rather than with a focus on satisfying customer needs. Hence, the marketing situation itself is likely to make ulterior motives accessible.

### Vulnerable Consumers?

The literature reviewed above suggests that, in general, consumers will be well able to resist or discount manipulative persuasive attempts. During sales encounters for example, the sales context by itself is likely to activate one's persuasion knowledge, increasing consumers' awareness of possible influence attempts. Hence, the mere confrontation with a salesperson is believed to increase consumers' resistance to deceptive recommendations.

This optimistic assumption seems to contradict findings obtained in the interpersonal persuasion literature (for a review, see for example Cialdini and Goldstein 2004), where a variety of influence tactics have been described that all successfully lure people into a deceptive persuasion attempt. Examples of these tactics include the foot-in-the door technique (Freedman and Fraser 1966), the door-in-the face technique (Cialdini 1975), the that's-not-all tactic (Burger 1986), and the low-ball technique (Cialdini et al. 1978). These tactics may be explicit – such as the direct request to comply with an “unrefusable offer” – or implicit – such as an advertisement summing up all the benefits of a given product. In all these cases however, consumers explicitly recognize that they are being urged to respond in a desired way.

The extensive evidence for the success of these influence tactics suggests that consumers may be more vulnerable to persuasion attempts than is generally assumed by the persuasion knowledge literature: consumers may know that they are influenced in a certain marketing situation, but may not always use this knowledge when they make judgments and choices. In the present paper we show that even when consumers' persuasion knowledge should be highly accessible – because they are confronted with a blatant persuasion attempt – subtle environmental cues can prevent consumers from applying their knowledge to the situation. More specifically we argue that environmental distraction, such as background music, can moderate the effect of accessibility on consumers' use of persuasion knowledge.

### Environmental Distraction, Working Memory, and Use of Persuasion Knowledge

Several streams of research have shown that background music can have detrimental effects on task performance (Kellaris, Cox, and Cox 1993; Olsen 1997; Salamé and Baddeley

1989). For example, error rates in a memorization task increase when vocal or instrumental background music is playing (Salamé and Baddeley 1989). In addition, background music can impair comprehension of brand information that is presented in commercials (Olsen 1997). This disturbance in performance – caused by task-unrelated auditory elements – is explained by a disruption of resources used by the verbal component of the working memory system (Baddeley and Hitch 1974). The working memory system is assumed to consist of three components: the central executive, the phonological loop, and the visuo-spatial sketchpad (Baddeley 1986). The central executive controls information input and is responsible for planning, controlling and information-verification of input received from two subordinate systems. The first subordinate system, the phonological loop, is hypothesized to retain and process verbal and auditory information, while the second subordinate system, the visuo-spatial sketchpad, processes spatial information such as images and representations. Resources of these three subsystems are limited. Background music is assumed to disrupt task performance because it disturbs performance of the verbal component of working memory – the phonological loop. Hence, the more attention background music receives, the more it will interfere with ongoing verbal processing and the more likely it will distract ongoing information processing (Kellaris, Cox, and Cox 1993).

We argue that in order to infer a deceptive intent from a salesperson's advice consumers need to possess the necessary resources to interpret the (deceptive) advice as well to formulate counterarguments. As a result, disruptions of the verbal component of working memory are assumed to decrease the likelihood that consumers will correct for manipulative influence attempts. Hence, we expect that subtle auditory cues, such as background music, can disrupt consumers' use of persuasion knowledge – even when the influence attempt is extremely salient.



Our assumption that a disturbance of working memory capacity can influence consumers' inferences about salient persuasion attempts is consistent with persuasion knowledge literature's notion that the application of persuasion knowledge is a resource demanding higher inference process (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull 1988). Whereas making inferences on the basis of observed behavior is assumed to be an automatic process ("this salesperson is really nice"), adjusting these inferences for additional situational influences ("salespeople are nice and friendly because they want to increase sales; does this salesperson have an ulterior motive?") is assumed to require an essential amount of cognitive capacity. Indeed, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) observed that when their participants were cognitively "busy" (i.e., when they had to perform other simultaneous and cognitive demanding tasks), they evaluated the salesperson as more sincere compared to when they were not cognitively "busy". Hence, decreases in cognitive resources will decrease the likelihood that consumers will use their persuasion knowledge making a judgment or choice.

However, we extend persuasion literature in two ways. First, we show that disruptions of working memory capacity can prevent application of consumers' persuasion knowledge even when the ulterior motive is extremely salient. As argued before, persuasion knowledge literature suggests that as long as salespeople's ulterior motives are salient (as is the case in most sales contexts), consumers are well able to correct for possible influence attempts. In contrast, we posit that working memory capacity moderates the effect of accessibility on consumers' use of persuasion knowledge and that disruptions of consumers' capacity can hinder use of persuasion knowledge even when the persuasion knowledge is believed to be highly accessible. Second, we show that even subtle manipulations of working memory capacity – such as the presence of

background music – can decrease the likelihood of applying one’s persuasion knowledge when the ulterior motive is highly salient.

## **STUDY 1**

In this first study we examine whether background music can lead to decreased use of persuasion knowledge when participants are confronted with a blatant ulterior motive.

The persuasion knowledge literature assumes that consumers’ life-long experiences provide them with ample abilities to react to persuasion attempts. We propose that under normal (and presumably optimal) conditions, individuals’ coping capability is maximal and will lead them to discount blatant persuasion attempts.

We expect that the more attention background music receives, the likelier its disruption of working memory capacity, and the likelier its interference with consumers’ use of persuasion knowledge. Music’s ability to engage listeners’ attention refers to the activation potential of the music sound (Kroebe-Riel 1979) and can stem from objective properties such as speed and loudness (Berlyne 1974; Kellaris, Cox, and Cox 1993). As such, we assume that fast music will be more distracting for working memory capacity than slow music, and will be more likely to interfere with consumers’ use of persuasion knowledge.

More specifically we expect that – consistent with persuasion knowledge literature – participants will generally follow the advice of a salesperson when there is no salient ulterior motive, and correct for manipulative attempts whenever the ulterior motive becomes salient. In the latter condition however, we propose that the likelihood that consumers will correct for manipulative attempts will decrease as the tempo of the background music increases.

## Participants, Procedure and Design

Participants were 116 undergraduate students who participated on a volunteer basis in a scientific study that was ostensibly sponsored by a market research institute. The design was a 2 Background Music (Fast vs. Slow) x 2 Salience of the Ulterior Motive (Not Salient vs. Salient) x 2 Promotion (Promoted Brand vs. Not Promoted Brand) mixed subjects design.

The apparent purpose of the study was to test consumers' taste evaluations of two foreign brands of lemonade presumably to be introduced soon in the local market. They were presented a cup of each lemonade brand, and were asked to evaluate both of them. The two cups were almost similar with regard to their taste. To "facilitate their evaluation", the experimenter always told that she preferred brand X (e.g., "Trendy Orange") over brand Y (e.g., "Flight Lemonade"), "because of its natural taste". To control for brand effects, preference instructions were counterbalanced across brands. As such, Promotion (Promoted Brand vs. Not Promoted Brand) is a within-subjects factor.

As argued before, music's ability to attract a listener's attention corresponds with its activation potential (Kellaris, Cox, and Cox 1993; Kroebel-Riel 1979) and can be manipulated by varying its speed (Berlyne 1974). Correspondingly, we manipulated Background Music (as a between-subjects factor) by varying the number of beats of otherwise identical melodies: 30 Beats per Minute (BpM) for the low distraction condition, and 170 BpM for the high distraction condition. In two separate pre-tests we tested whether fast versus slow background music induces a) different levels of activation and b) different levels of distraction. In a first pre-test ( $N = 40$ ), we observed that participants associated the fast music with higher activation levels than the low distracting music:  $t(37) = 11.04, p < .01$ . To assure that that our manipulation of Background

Music (i.e. fast vs. slow music) would disturb the verbal component of participants' working memory, we conducted a second pre-test ( $N = 29$ ) in which we asked participants to solve as many anagrams as possible in a time period of 5 minutes. While participants solved the anagrams, either the fast or slow music was playing in the background. If our fast music would be more disruptive for the verbal component of working memory than our slow music, we should observe that participants will spend more time per correctly solved anagram in the former condition. This was indeed the case: reactions times per correctly solved anagram were higher when participants were exposed to the fast music condition ( $M = 8.28$  seconds) compared to the slow music condition ( $M = 6.41$  seconds):  $t(27) = 2.63$ ,  $p = .01$  (analysis performed on log-transformed reaction times).

In order to manipulate salience of the ulterior motive the experimenter either wore a T-shirt of the promoted brand (Salient condition), or she wore an unrelated neutral T-shirt (Not Salient condition). Note that the experimental setting was ambiguous with regard to commercial purpose. Participants were told that it was a scientific study, sponsored by a market research institute, but they were left uncertain and uninformed about its real purpose. We expected that without the branded T-shirt, the experimenter's recommendation would be seen as a sincere advice. In contrast, when the researcher wore a T-shirt of the brand that she recommended, the ulterior motive of the research (influencing consumers' perceptions and preferences towards one of the brands) would become salient.

The dependent variable was evaluation of both the promoted and the non-promoted brand on five 9-point items (ranging from  $-4$  to  $+4$ ) labelled: good / bad, like / dislike, fresh / musty, tasty / unsavoury, love / hate. These items were averaged for analysis ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

## Results

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Insert figures 1a and 1b about here

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Figures 1a and 1b show evaluation scores as a function of Promotion of the brand and Salience of the ulterior motive for the slow versus fast Background Music condition respectively. A 3-way ANOVA was performed with Background Music and Salience as between-subjects factors and Promotion as within-subjects factor. We observed a strong main effect of Promotion ( $F(1, 112) = 18.45, p < .001$ ). Evaluations of the promoted brand were significantly higher than evaluations of the non-promoted brand ( $M = .93$  vs.  $M = .40$ ). This means that in general, the experimenter was able to influence participants. The only other significant effect was a 3-way interaction ( $F(1, 112) = 4.22, p < .05$ ). Accordingly, we analysed both simple 2-way interactions.

In the slow Background Music condition, we observed a near to significant interaction between Salience and Promotion ( $F(1, 112) = 3.55, p = .06$ ). When the ulterior motive was not salient, evaluations of the promoted brand were more positive than evaluations of the non-promoted brand ( $M = .94$  vs.  $M = .15$ ;  $F(1, 112) = 11.74, p < .001$ ), suggesting that participants did follow the experimenter's advice. However, when the ulterior motive was made salient, no difference was found between evaluations of the promoted and the not promoted brand ( $M = .65$  vs.  $M = .48$ ;  $F < 1$ ), suggesting that participants did not follow the advice of the experimenter.

In the fast Background Music condition, we did not observe an interaction between Promotion and Salience ( $F(1, 112) = 1.07, p > .30$ ). Consistent with expectations, the observed main effect of Promotion ( $F(1, 112) = 10.19, p = .001$ ) suggests that – regardless of the salience of the ulterior motive – participants were more inclined to follow the experimenter's advice and

evaluated the promoted brand as more positive than the non promoted brand ( $M = 1.06$  vs.  $M = .50$ )

## Discussion

Consistent with the persuasion knowledge literature we found that consumers were less likely to follow the salesperson's advice when an ulterior motive was made salient compared to when it was not. This finding was only observed when the tempo of the background music was slow. When fast (and more distracting) background music was played, we observed that participants continued to follow the experimenter's advice – regardless of the salience of the ulterior motive. These results suggest that fast music prevents people from applying their persuasion knowledge – even when the ulterior motive becomes salient. Hence, whereas Campbell and Kirmani (2001) showed that people always apply their persuasion knowledge when the ulterior motive is made salient, we show that in a real consumption choice setting, use of persuasion knowledge is hindered by the presence of subtle environmental cues (such as fast background music), even when the ulterior motive is highly blatant.

One problem of the present study is that we did not control for effects of our background music on participants' mood states. Our fast music condition could have brought people in a positive mood state, whereas our slow music condition could have brought people in a more negative mood state (or vice versa). Since we did not control for these possible mood effects, we cannot exclude the possibility that our observed effects were driven by mood. Since positive mood is associated with a heuristic and less systematic processing mode (e.g. Mackie and Worth 1989; Schwarz 1990), people might have been brought in a positive mood and could therefore

have been less suspicious about the ulterior motive. In our second study we attempt to exclude this alternative explanation.

## **STUDY 2**

The purpose of this second study is twofold. First, we want to rule out the alternative explanation that our observed effects in the previous study are due to mood effects. Therefore we manipulate background music that is as much free of content as possible: the ticking of a metronome. We assume that manipulating background music by varying the speed of the metronom ticks affects participants' level of attention and distraction, but not their mood states. In order to further exclude a mood explanation, we will manipulate consumers' pre-existing mood states. Hence, if it is the level of attention and distraction that influences consumers' use of persuasion knowledge, we should observe decreases in use of persuasion knowledge as a function of tempo of the background music, regardless of participants' pre-existing mood states.

A second purpose of this study is to look at consumers' real choice behavior. It is possible that participants in our previous study merely followed the advice of the experimenter because they had nothing to loose. In this study we measure participants' real choice behavior by giving them the opportunity to take home a sample of the brand that they prefer. Hence, actual choices for the blatantly promoted brand would be a stronger indication that persuasion knowledge was not applied.

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Participants were 70 undergraduate students who participated on a volunteer basis. As in the previous study, they were asked to participate in a scientific study that is ostensibly sponsored by a market research agency. The design was a 2 Background Music (Slow vs. Fast) x 2 Mood (Positive vs. Negative) by 2 Promotion (Promoted Brand vs. Not Promoted Brand) mixed-subjects design.

Importantly, we made the ulterior motive salient in each of these conditions. This was done as in the previous study: The experimenter wore a T-shirt of the brand that was promoted. As in the previous study, we assumed that the T-shirt should make the experimenter appear more suspicious.

The procedure was identical to the one used in the first study, except for the fact that subjects were first brought in the intended mood state (hence, mood was a between subjects factor). Participants were told that the psychology department of the university was working on a “Life Event Inventory”, and was still looking for positive (in the Positive Mood condition) or negative (in the Negative Mood condition) life events. They were then given 5 minutes time to report on one such specific, recently experienced positive or negative life event (see also Bless et al. 1996). This part of the study was ostensibly unrelated to the remaining of the study (tasting lemonades), and was conducted in a different experimental room.

Unlike in study 1 we manipulated background music by manipulating the tick frequency of a metronome. We chose for metronome ticks because we believed that it was a content-free form of distraction manipulation, i.e. unrelated to mood. In our slow Background Music condition there were 25 ticks per minute, whereas in fast Background Music condition there were 110 ticks per minute. A pre-test showed that both manipulations differed with respect to perceived activation potential ( $t(79) = 5.57, p < .001$ ), but not with respect to perceived pleasure



( $t(79) = .22, p > .50$ ). As before, we wanted to assure ourselves that our manipulation (i.e. fast vs. slow background music) would disturb the verbal component of working memory. As in study 1 we found that reactions times per correctly solved anagram were higher when participants were exposed to the fast music condition ( $M = 8.23$  seconds) compared to the slow music condition ( $M = 6.99$  seconds):  $t(44) = 2.33, p < .05$  (analysis performed on log-transformed reaction times).

As in study 1, we measured evaluations of both the promoted and the not promoted brand. The same 5 bipolar items were used. In addition, we also measured participants' real choice behavior. At the end of the experimental session participants were given the opportunity to take home their preferred brand of lemonade.

## Results

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Insert figures 2a and 2b about here

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*Evaluation Scores.* Figures 2a and 2b display evaluation scores of the promoted and not promoted brand as a function of Background Music and Mood. A 3-way ANOVA was performed with Background Music and Mood as between-subject factors and Promotion as a within-subjects factor. The significant main effect of Mood revealed that overall, evaluations were more positive under conditions of positive compared to negative mood ( $M = .70$  vs.  $M = .27, F(1, 66) = 5.79, p < .05$ ). In addition, the main effect of Promotion showed that evaluations for the promoted brand were more positive than evaluations for the non-promoted brand ( $M = .69$  vs.  $M = .28, F(1, 66) = 6.56, p < .05$ ). More interestingly however, a significant 2-way interaction was found between Background Music and Promotion:  $F(1, 66) = 4.46, p < .05$ . None of the other effects were significant (all  $F$ 's  $< 1$ ). Below we will report for each Background Music condition separately.

In our slow Background Music condition no significant effects were found. Neither the main effects (both  $p$ 's  $> .29$ ), nor the interaction effect between Mood and Promotion reached significance ( $F < 1$ ). As expected, because the ulterior motive was salient, no difference between the promoted and not promoted brand was found ( $F < 1$ ): neither in the positive mood condition ( $M = .68$  vs.  $M = .60$ ;  $F < 1$ ) nor in the negative mood condition ( $M = .40$  vs.  $M = .34$ ;  $F < 1$ ) did participants follow the advice of the experimenter.

In our fast Background Music condition, both a main effect of Promotion ( $F(1, 66) = 10.52, p = .001$ ) as well as a main effect of Mood was found ( $F(1, 66) = 5.40, p < .05$ ). Overall, evaluations were more positive when people were in a positive mood state compared to in a negative mood state ( $M = .77$  vs.  $M = .16$ ). More importantly, and consistent with expectations, no interaction effect was found between Mood and Promotion ( $F < 1$ ). In both the positive as well as in the negative mood condition, participants were more inclined to follow the advice of the experimenter, even when the ulterior motive was salient (for the positive mood condition:  $M = 1.05$  vs.  $M = .48$ ,  $F(1, 66) = 2.87, p = .09$ , marginally significant; in the negative mood condition:  $M = .61$  vs.  $M = -.28$ ,  $F(1, 66) = 8.54, p < .01$ ).

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Insert figure 3 about here

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*Choice Behavior.* A logistic regression analysis was performed on the binary choice data (1 if participants' choice was similar to the promoted brand, 0 if else). Background Music and Mood, as well as their interaction effect were included in the model ( $-2LL = 80.73$ ;  $\chi^2 = 13.48, p < .01$ ). Percentages of choices for the promoted brand are shown in figure 3. We observed a significant main effect of Background Music ( $B = 1.75, p < .05$ ). None of the other effects were significant ( $p$ 's  $> .16$ ). Consistent with the evaluation scores, we found that participants were more likely to

follow the advice of the experimenter when Background Music was fast (79,41%) compared to slow (41.67%).

## Discussion

Our results are consistent with those of study 1, and show that fast background music decreases consumers' application of persuasion knowledge. These effects are not due to fluctuations in people's mood states, and translate into real choice behavior.

## STUDY 3

The results of the previous two studies suggest that fast background music prevents consumers from discounting blatant persuasion attempts. Instead, consumers seem to be influenced by the superficial recommendation of the salesperson.

Note however, that our manipulation of salience of the ulterior motive was never overtly and unambiguously misleading, and not all participants may have noticed the experimenters' promotional T-shirt. As a result, our manipulations may have been too weak in order to evoke real skepticism.

The purpose of the present study was to make our manipulation of salience of the ulterior motive much stronger, thereby creating a condition in which the ulterior motive of the experimenter is very obvious. If our assumptions with regard to the effects of environmental distraction (such as fast vs. slow background music) on the use of persuasion knowledge hold, we

would expect a similar failure to discount blatant persuasion attempts when this attempt is unambiguous and extremely blatant.

The design was similar to the one employed in study 1, instead for the incorporation of a condition in which we made the ulterior motive of the experimenter extremely blatant: Besides wearing a T-shirt of the promoted brand, he also wore a promotional cap, and pretended to call the national sales representative about the “promotional campaign” and the delivery of the “promoted lemonade”.

### Participants, Design, and Procedure

Participants were 163 undergraduate students. They were led to believe that a market research company sponsored this study. Participants were rewarded with a free movie ticket for participation.

The design was a 2 Background Music (Slow vs. Fast) x 3 Salience of the Ulterior Motive (Not Salient, Low Salient, Highly Salient) by 2 Promotion (Promoted vs. Not Promoted) full factorial mixed-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions.

The procedure was identical to that of study 1, except for the additional inclusion of a Highly Salient condition. In this condition, the experimenter did not only wear a T-shirt of the promoted brand (as in the Low Salient condition), but also a cap with a large inscription of the promoted brand. Moreover, the experimenter pretended to make a phone call to the national sales-representative shortly after she expressed her own brand preference: “Yes hello, this is the sales-representative of the Western part for [promoted brand]. Yes [promoted brand]. I’m still expecting the delivery truck that should deliver our lemonades, and it is already one hour late. Is

it still coming? - ... - OK, thanks!'. In the other two Salience conditions (Not Salient and Low Salient) the call was neutral: "Yes hello, it's me. I just wondered whether all arrangements have been made with regard to our removal truck - ... - OK, thanks! I'll talk to you later!'. "

Brand evaluations were measured as in the previous 2 studies.

## Results

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Insert figures 2a and 2b about here

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Figures 4a and 4b display mean evaluation scores as a function of Salience and Background Music. A 3-way ANOVA was performed, but only the main effect of promotion was significant ( $F(1, 157) = 26.70, p < .001$ ). However, given our specific hypothesis (that can not be tested with overall tests), and given the strong effects obtained in our previous studies, we performed specific planned comparisons (Rosnow and Rosenthal 1995).

In our slow Background Music condition, we observed only a significant difference between the promoted and the non promoted brand when the ulterior motive was not salient:  $F(1, 157) = 6.60, p = .01$  ( $M = 1.42$  vs.  $M = .96$ ). As expected, in this condition the advice of the experimenter was considered as sincere advice. In the other two conditions, where the ulterior motive was salient, we expected the advice to be considered as manipulative and deceptive, and participants were expected not to follow the advice of the experimenter. Consistent with this, in both the low salient as well as the highly salient condition, no difference was found between the promoted and the not promoted brand (for the low salient condition:  $M = 1.25$  vs.  $M = 1.00, F(1, 157) = 1.64, p > .20$ ; for the high salient condition:  $M = 1.18$  vs.  $M = .96; F(1, 157) = 1.50, p > .22$ ).

Different results were obtained for the fast Background Music condition. Here, participants were inclined to follow the given advice irrespective of the salience of the ulterior motive. In all conditions, the promoted brand was evaluated significantly better than the not promoted brand ( $F(1, 157) = 8.40, p < .01, M = 1.42$  vs.  $M = .88$  [not salient condition];  $F(1, 157) = 4.06, p < .05, M = 1.14$  vs.  $M = .75$  [low salient condition], and  $F(1, 157) = 7.44, p < .01, M = 1.39$  vs.  $M = .89$  [high salient condition]).

## Discussion

Again, evidence was found that a subtle cue such as background music can prevent consumers from discounting manipulative persuasion attempts. In addition, and interestingly, even when the ulterior motive is extremely salient and blatant, participants seem to take the advice of the experimenter as sincere advice when fast background music is playing.

## STUDY 4

The aim of this study was twofold. First, the results of the previous 3 studies indicate that consumers are extremely vulnerable to manipulative persuasion attempts: even a subtle environmental cue such as background music is able to decrease consumers' use of persuasion knowledge, making them more receptive for extremely blatant persuasion attempts. Consumer welfare would benefit from knowledge about variables that can eliminate the effects of environmental distracters on use of persuasion knowledge. One such variable might be consumers' processing motivation.

In the present study we manipulate consumers' processing motivation by making them more (or less) accountable for their decision. Since processing motivation is generally considered to increase the consumers' focus on the presented message, one can expect that highly motivated consumers will be more focused on the (deceptive) message, and therefore less likely to be distracted when applying their persuasion knowledge. As a result, we propose that the disrupting influence of background music will cease to exist when participants are highly motivated to process the message content. Consistent with this expectation, Olsen (1997) observed that the disruptive effect of background music decreased as participants' motivation to process the ad content increased (i.e., a goal-oriented vs. incidental learning condition). We therefore expect that when motivation (accountability) is high, fast background music will not interfere with the application of persuasion knowledge, whereas when motivation (accountability) is relatively low, background music continues to disrupt application of persuasion knowledge.

Secondly, in our previous studies, we mainly focused on a comparison between evaluations of the promoted versus the not promoted brand. Because we manipulated salience of the ulterior motive by increasing the presence of promotional material, the results obtained in our previous studies may reflect consumers' sensitivity to promotional material and not – or to a lesser extent – the intended application of persuasion knowledge. For example, fast background music may have resulted in a more peripheral processing mode (Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1986), thereby making consumers more sensible to the presence of promotional material. In order to exclude such an alternative explanation, and in order to provide a more convincing argument for decreased use of persuasion knowledge as a result of fast background music, we now focus on participants' skepticism scores. Decreased use of persuasion knowledge is indeed correlated with a decrease in consumer skepticism (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998).

In study 4 we therefore not only measured consumers' preference for the promoted over the not promoted brand, but also their skepticism towards the experimenter. If our hypothesized effects can indeed be ascribed to decreased use of persuasion knowledge, we should observe that fast background music not only increases participants' decreases the level of consumer skepticism when the ulterior motive is highly salient. When consumers are highly motivated, no such effects are expected.

### Participants, Design, and Procedure

A total of 104 undergraduate students participated in this study in order to fulfil course requirements. As in the previous studies, participants were led to believe that a market research company sponsored the study.

The design was a 2 Background Music (Slow vs. Fast) x 2 Salience of the Ulterior Motive (Not Salient vs. Highly Salient) x 2 Motivation (Low vs. High) full factorial between-subjects design.

The procedure was identical to that used in studies 1 and 3 (only the highly salient condition). In addition, motivation was manipulated by giving specific task instructions before participants entered the experimental room. An independent experimenter provided instructions that made participants either high or low accountable for their evaluation and preference. In the high motivation condition, the following instructions were given: "The university and a market research company are performing a study about foreign lemonades. We are interested how the local market would react to these lemonades. It is important to think carefully about your opinion, because the most popular lemonade will be sold at the university and will be available in the



university's restaurant. The university newspaper will publish an article about this drink, and there is a considerable chance that the newspaper will ask for your interview after this session."

In the low motivation conditions, only the first two sentences were given to participants.

Consumer skepticism was measured on three seven-point items (ranging from 1 to 7). Participants were asked to indicate their opinion about the experimenter: misleading / sincere, manipulative / informative, and I approve / I disapprove ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

### Consumer Skepticism Results

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Insert figures 5a and 5b about here

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Mean scores on consumer skepticism are displayed in figures 5a and 5b. Lower scores reflect lower levels of consumer skepticism. A 3-way ANOVA was performed with Background Music, Salience and Motivation as between subjects factors. A marginally significant main effect of Motivation was obtained, suggesting that participants were somewhat more skeptical in the high motivation compared to the low motivation condition ( $M = 3.37$  vs.  $M = 3.01$ ,  $F(1, 96) = 3.05$ ,  $p = .08$ ). In addition, a marginally significant 2-way interaction between Background Music and Salience was found ( $F(1, 96) = 3.50$ ,  $p = .06$ ). More interestingly, and as expected, we obtained a significant 3-way interaction between Background Music, Salience, and Motivation:  $F(1, 96) = 6.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ). No other effects were significant (all  $p$ 's  $> .23$ ). Below we will report the evaluation results for each motivation condition separately.

When motivation was low, the 2-way interaction between Background Music and Salience was again significant ( $F(1, 96) = 8.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ). When distraction of background music was low, participants were less skeptical when the ulterior motive was not salient compared to

when it was blatant ( $M = 2.73$  vs.  $M = 3.75$ ,  $F(1, 96) = 5.49$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In contrast, when distraction of background music was high, participants were somewhat less skeptical when the ulterior motive was salient versus when it was not ( $M = 2.39$  vs.  $M = 3.17$ ,  $F(1, 96) = 2.86$ ,  $p = .09$ , marginally significant).

When motivation was high, again no significant effects were observed: neither the main effects (all  $F$ 's  $< 1$ ), nor the interaction effect reached significance ( $F < 1$ )

## Discussion

As expected consumers were found to be more skeptical towards the experimenter when the ulterior motive was made salient compared to when it was not. This effect however diminished when fast (distracting) background music was played. These results confirm our suggestion that even subtle background music is able to prevent consumers from applying their persuasion knowledge and to decrease their skepticism even when the ulterior motive is highly salient. Our results also suggest that being highly motivated and accountable for ones decision protects consumers from deceptive influence attempts and makes one more skeptical in general.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our results question whether successful coping with persuasion attempts is as common as is suggested by the persuasion knowledge literature. In Campbell and Kirmani's (2000) study for example, consumers were found to be well able to discount the deceptive persuasion attempts from the moment that the ulterior motive became salient: In their study, the mere awareness that

an attempt preceded a purchase appeared sufficient to cue participants to the ulterior motive of the sales person. Campbell and Kirmani's results are based on participants' reactions to scenarios, and as such may reflect consumer theories on how they should cope with persuasion tactics rather than their actual reactions in such circumstances. Our studies however tested the extent to which consumers apply their persuasion knowledge in response to an actually experienced marketing tactic. The results of our 4 studies suggest that Campbell and Kirmani's results may have overstated consumers' ability to discount for manipulative persuasion attempts, and may not be generalizable to real life consumer experiences. Our participants were faced with a probably unexpected and blatant attempt to influence their preferences. Also, the cue to ulterior motives was blatant and impossible to ignore. Appropriate discounting only occurred when the environmental conditions were optimal and when there was no interference of fast distracting background music. Even a subtle cue, such as fast background music, was able to prevent people from resisting to deceptive persuasion attempts.

We argue that the disruptive influence of background music on consumers' use of persuasion knowledge is caused by the fact that background music depletes resources of the verbal component of working memory (Olsen 1997; Salamé and Baddeley 1989) that is also assumed to be taken up by the use of persuasion knowledge. As our results suggest, the faster the tempo of the background music, the more likely it will interfere with consumers' use of persuasion knowledge. In the present research we focused on the disrupting influence of auditory environmental elements. An interesting suggestion for further research would be to look at the possible disrupting influence of visual environmental elements such as moving images or distracting gestures.

A possible alternative explanation for our results may be that distracting background music does not actually decrease consumers' use of persuasion knowledge and their skepticism, but instead lowers their ability to process the message in general and puts them in a more peripheral processing mode. As a result, they may have been more persuaded by peripheral elements such as the presence of promotional material (we manipulated salience of the ulterior motive by increasing the presence of promotional material) (Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). The skepticism results obtained in our fourth study however refute this alternative explanation and suggest that distracting background music not only affects mere evaluations of promoted versus not promoted products but also consumers' level of skepticism towards the sales encounter.

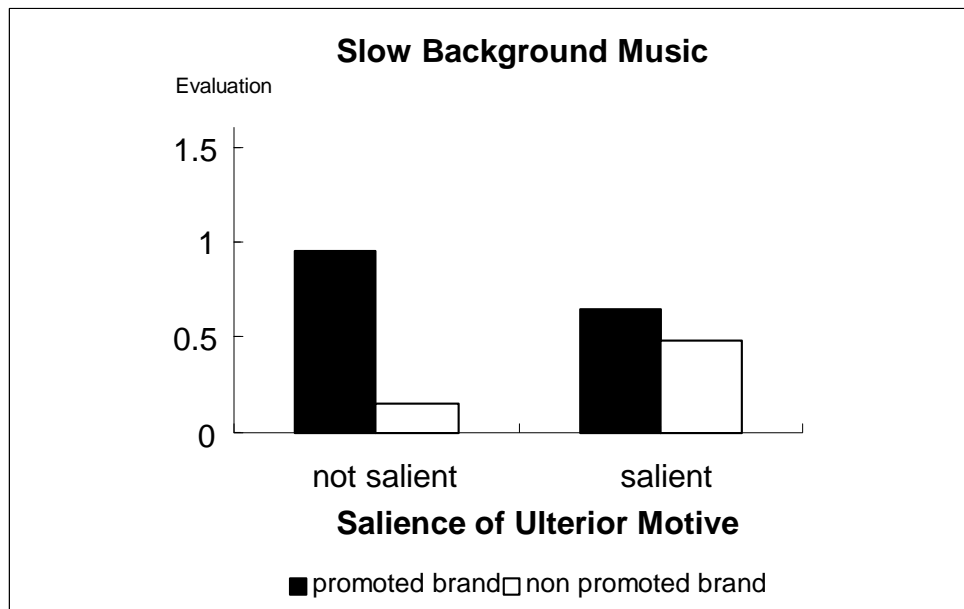
From a welfare perspective our results may induce some pessimism about consumer vulnerability. Our results show that consumers are often not able to resist or ignore an even blatant persuasion attempt. We are well aware of the fact that, from an ethical perspective, our results have far going implications with regard to consumer exploitation. However, our results also show that increasing consumers' involvement and commitment to the purchase situation (or increasing one's motivation in general) is the best way to resist blatant and misleading persuasion attempts. This information is extremely useful for governmental policy makers.

## FIGURES 1a and 1b

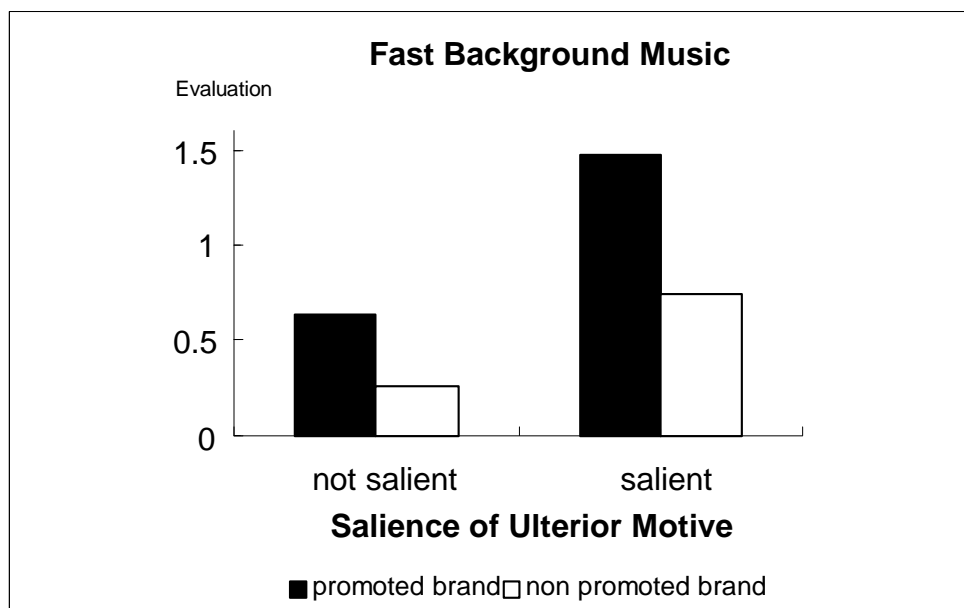
Mean Brand Evaluations as a Function of Salience of the Ulterior Motive for the Slow and Fast

Background Music Conditions

**Figure 1a**



**Figure 1b**



FIGURES 2a and 2b

Mean Brand Evaluations as a Function of Mood for the Slow and Fast Background Music

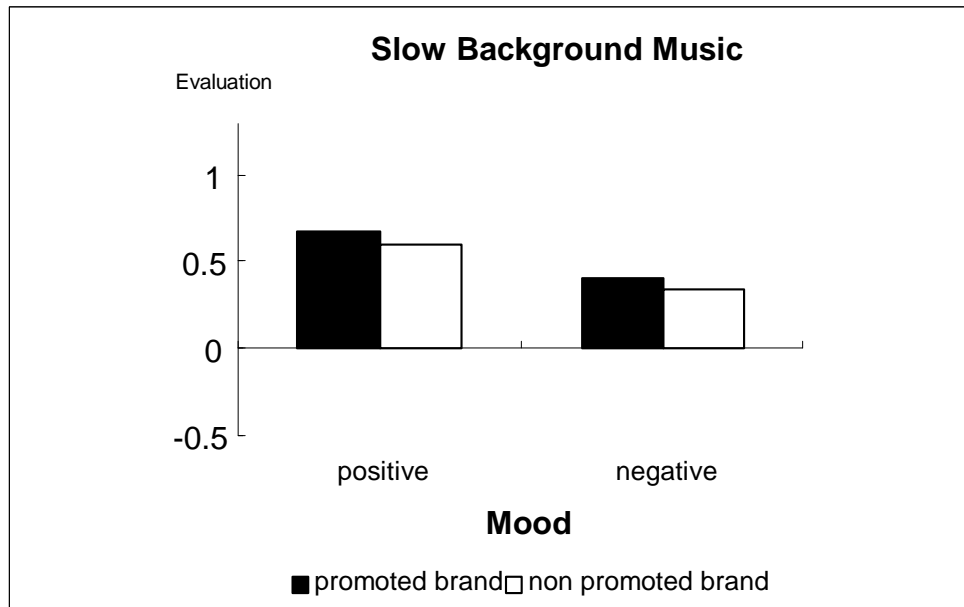
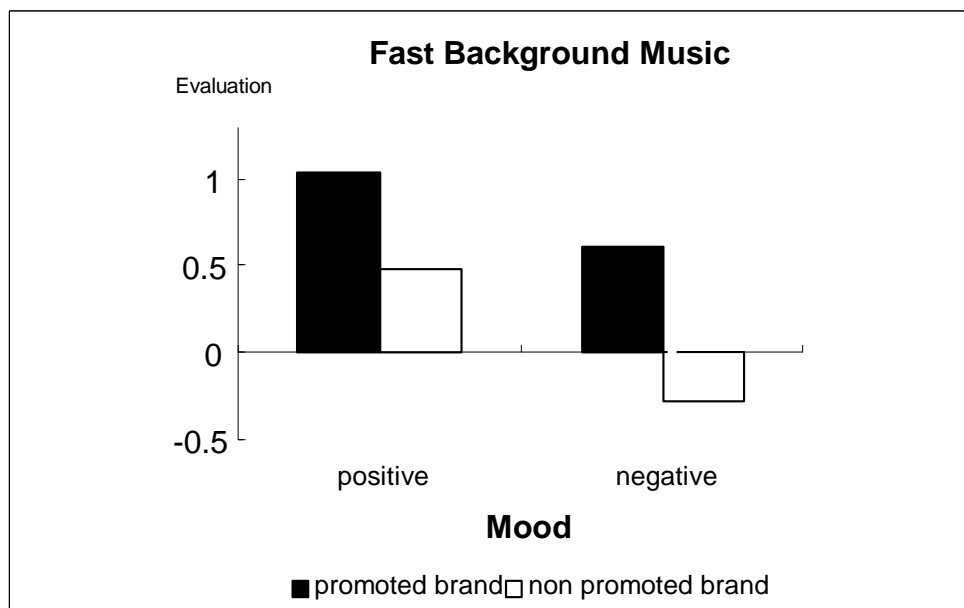
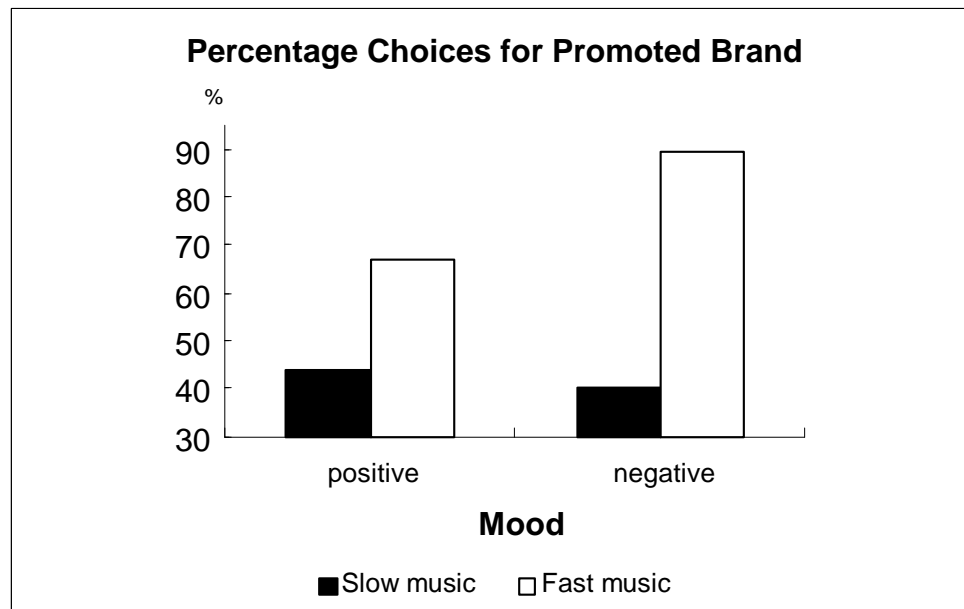
**Figure 2a****Figure 2b**

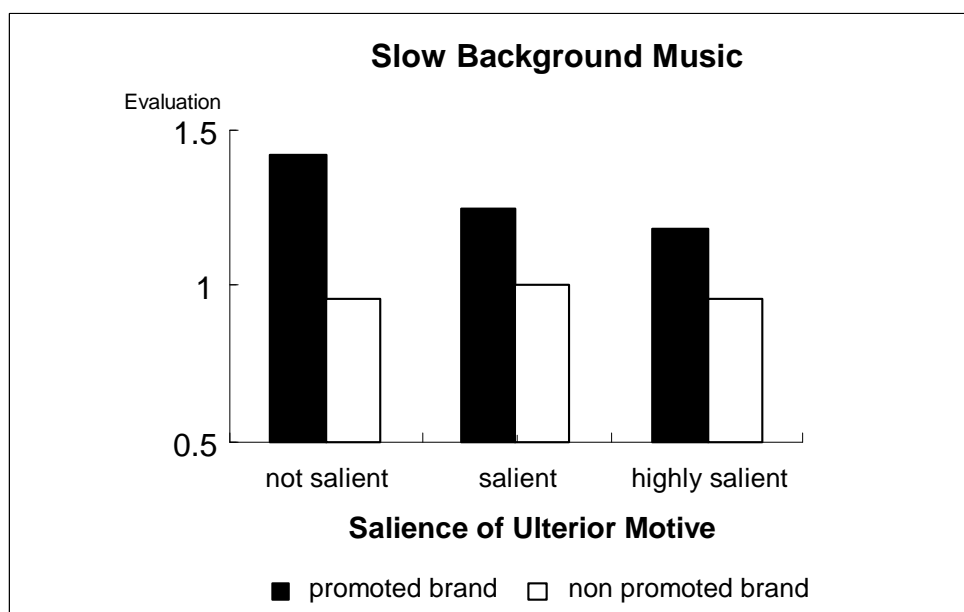
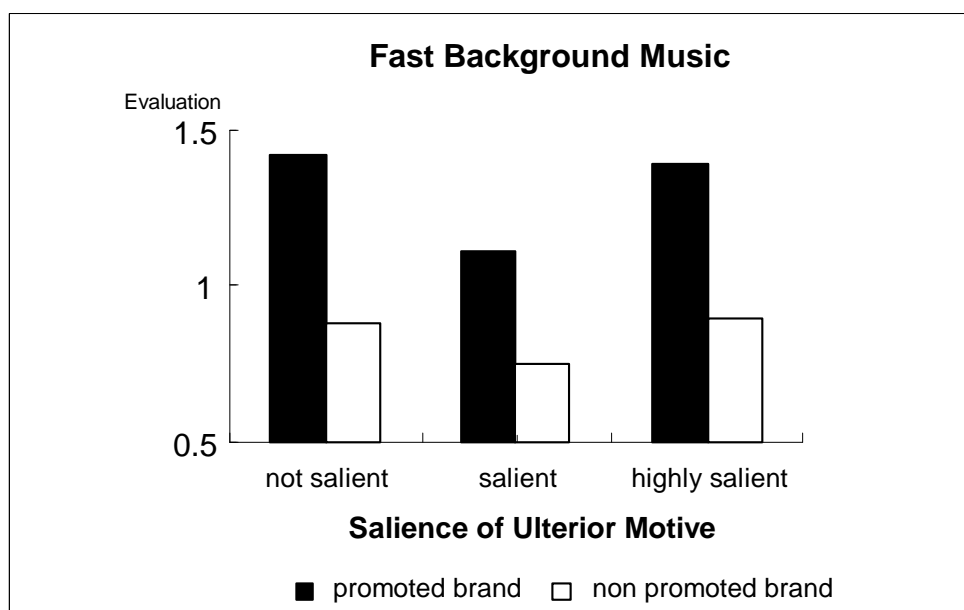
FIGURE 3

Percentage of Choices for the Promoted Brand as a Function of Mood



FIGURES 4a and 4b

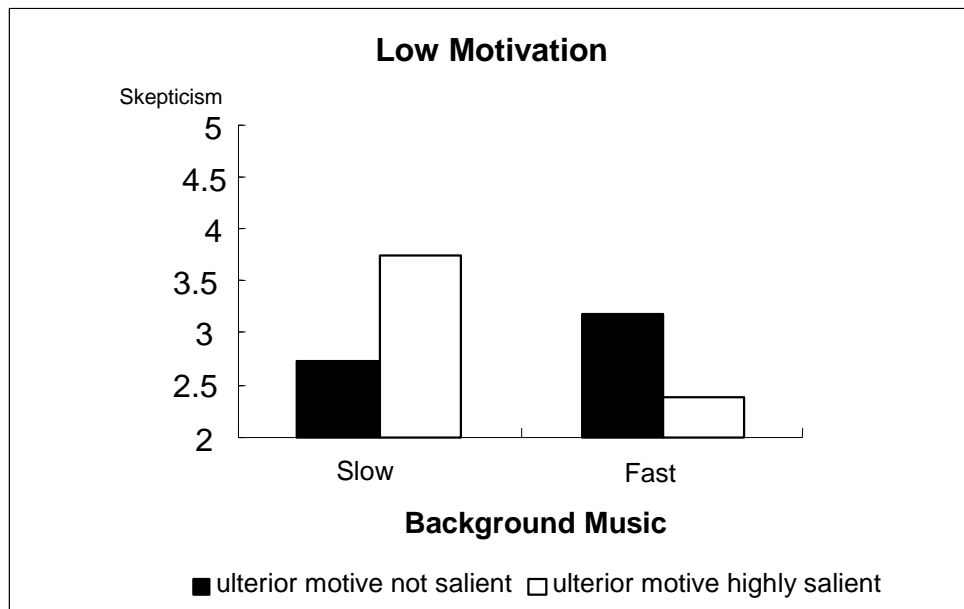
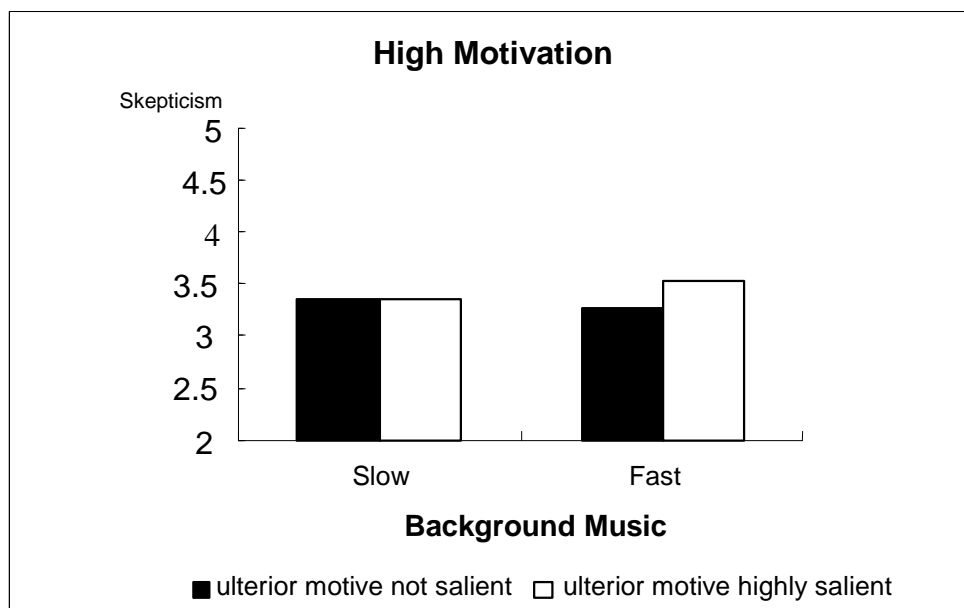
Mean Brand Evaluations as a Function of Salience of the Ulterior Motive for the Slow and Fast  
Background Music Conditions

**Figure 4a****Figure 4b**



FIGURES 5a and 5b

Mean Skepticism Scores for the Promoted Brand as a Function of Background Music for the Low and High Motivation Conditions

**Figure 5a****Figure 5b**

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